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FM AMEMBASSY MANILA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9891
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS IMMEDIATE
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000483

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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DEPT FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958:N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KCOR](#) [PINR](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: LIMITED PROTESTS AGAINST PRESIDENT MARK PEOPLE POWER
ANNIVERSARY

REF: A. MANILA 404

[1](#)B. MANILA 316

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On the 22nd anniversary of the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution that ousted former President Ferdinand Marcos, thousands of Filipinos turned out to demonstrate, some calling for President Arroyo to step down over corruption charges related to a government contract, others showing their support for the beleaguered president. The political landscape was also divided, with opposition Senate President Manuel Villar asserting that the President's actions on a disputed infrastructure contract constituted an impeachable offense, while pro-administration Senators, led by influential Juan Enrile, continued to defend her. The Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police remained solidly behind President Arroyo, as the Catholic Church hierarchy displayed an ambivalent posture, calling for soul-searching on the country's endemic corruption but avoiding a call for public intervention in the political process. While citizens, politicians, and public figures openly discussed her fate, President Arroyo brushed aside calls for her resignation and visited typhoon-ravaged areas of the country, projecting a business as usual demeanor. END SUMMARY.

NATIONWIDE RALLIES MARK PEOPLE POWER ANNIVERSARY

[1](#)2. (SBU) Generally peaceful rallies - with some scuffles between police and protesters - took place nationwide February 25 to mark the 22nd anniversary of the People Power Revolution to call for the resignation of President Gloria Arroyo. Bayan, an umbrella organization for leftist groups, organized anti-Arroyo demonstrations in at least 15 cities around the country, including Baguio in Northern Luzon, Legazpi in the Visayas, and Cagayan de Oro in Mindanao. In Manila, the leftist organization led approximately 2,000 protesters to the historic Mendiola Bridge, just outside Malacanang Palace, where 13 protesting farmers were killed by security forces in 1987, and called for President Arroyo to step down. Citizens' Congress, a pro-administration group, concurrently staged a rally in Intramuros, Manila, calling for greater unity and a stop to political bickering. None of the demonstrations were even a fraction of the size of the massive People Power protests that brought down Presidents Marcos and Estrada.

SECURITY FORCES LOYAL TO PRESIDENT

[1](#)3. (SBU) Amid rumors that elements of the military would withdraw support from Arroyo, Armed Forces of the Philippines Chief Hermogenes Esperon, along with the major service commanders of the Philippine Army, Navy and Air Force, stressed the military's loyalty

to the Constitution and the President and assured publicly that no military personnel would take part in anti-government rallies. He dismissed the rumors as disinformation campaigns aimed at creating a wedge in the military. Likewise, Philippine National Police (PNP) Director General Avelino Razon, Jr. said plainly that "the PNP will not get ourselves involved in politics, much less political intervention." Razon asserted that the police remain "united and loyal behind the Constitution and the duly constituted authorities." Esperon and Razon led a "unity march" from the People Power monument to a well-known golf club.

TAKING SECURITY PRECAUTIONS

14. (SBU) Though both the PNP and AFP expected the demonstrations to be peaceful, the PNP deployed approximately 1,200 PNP personnel around the Metro Manila area, including Malacanang Palace, while over 5,000 PNP personnel from nearby Central Luzon and Southern Tagalog regions were placed on standby. The AFP went on "red alert," with 3,000 troops from the National Capital Region Command augmented by an "anti-coup" battalion composed of four companies of infantry from different divisions. In addition, dozens of AFP armored assets were deployed to assist the PNP if called upon or if there were uniformed AFP members joining the rallies.

FORMER PRESIDENT RAMOS WARNS ABOUT "CORRUPT OFFICIALS"

15. (SBU) Speaking in an EDSA anniversary kick-off ceremony attended by President Arroyo on February 22, respected former President Fidel Ramos, an Arroyo ally who played a pivotal role in the overthrow of Marcos and is considered a weathervane of public opinion, warned about "corrupt officials" and stressed that "greed, corruption and apathy" -- sins which precipitated the first people power revolution in 1986 -- are back. "History might yet call us to come together

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once again to offer our lives and fortunes on the altar of our civic ideals." The former President has been a pillar of support to President Arroyo during a series of political crises.

SENATE PRESIDENT VILLAR CALLS FOR IMPEACHMENT

16. (SBU) Shortly after President Arroyo's admission on February 23 that there were "irregularities" in a \$329 million national broadband contract with Chinese firm ZTE (ref A), Senate President Manuel Villar argued that her signing of the contract constituted an impeachable offense. Senator Aquilino Pimentel said he would urge the Senate to examine Arroyo's statements for possible violation of anti-graft laws. President Arroyo has thus far survived three impeachment attempts in the House of Representatives, the last one in July 2007. By law, the earliest an impeachment complaint can be filed against her is July 2008. The Constitution prohibits the filing of more than one impeachment complaint within a one-year period.

ON THE FRINGES: SNAP ELECTIONS, CARETAKER PRESIDENT

17. (SBU) Independent Representative Eduardo Nonato Joson filed a bill calling for snap elections, believing that the option would prevent "anarchists and opportunists from taking advantage of the present crisis." However, the proposal will likely not fly in the pro-administration chamber. For his part, former President Estrada appealed to the military to support the people's call for the President to resign but rejected a military takeover. He offered to become "caretaker President" in the event the President's seat is vacated.

PRESIDENT ARROYO: "I WILL LEAVE IN 2010"

18. (SBU) Over the last few days, President Arroyo brushed aside calls for her resignation and visited typhoon-ravaged areas of the country, projecting a business-as-usual demeanor. She reiterated

that, in keeping with the Constitution, she would not resign but would step down when she finishes her term in 2010 and strive "to promote reforms so that I could leave a stronger country to my successor." Referring to the People Power movements that brought down Presidents Marcos and Estrada, Arroyo said: "The world embraced EDSA I in 1986. The world tolerated EDSA II. The world will not forgive an EDSA III."

¶9. (SBU) On the same day, First Gentleman Mike Arroyo, who was seriously implicated in the ZTE scandal, left for Hong Kong for "an acupuncture treatment" after the Ombudsman began an investigation on the ZTE controversy. Summoned to its opening hearing, the First Gentleman sent his lawyer to represent him. Malacanang Palace, however, assured that he will testify if his medical condition allows it.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) President Arroyo's statement that the world would not forgive another popular revolt, while self-serving, carried a fundamental truth. Another people power revolution would make a habit of changing presidents between elections, through constitutionally-questionable means, with negative implications for political and economic stability, including foreign investment that the Philippines needs to sustain current economic growth. The Presidential elections in 2010 act as a brake on efforts to oust President Arroyo, since several politically powerful senators are candidates, and believe their chances are best served if President Arroyo completes her term. Despite outrage at corruption scandals among segments of the political class, the general public is not energized.

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